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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 000549

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SUBJECT: ACTIVIST REPORTS DEATH OF JASLYK INMATE

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

**¶11. (C) Summary:** In recent days, we have received conflicting reports on prison conditions from human rights activists. On May 8, Reuters reported that a prisoner at the Jaslyk prison in Karakalpakstan died, possibly from torture. Local human rights activist Surat Ikramov, most likely the source of the Reuters article, reported the same information on his website, but he later told poloff that the prisoner died from bronchitis due to poor prison conditions. Separately, Human Rights Watch's director reported an incident of collective punishment of inmates that allegedly occurred at a prison in Qarshi in February. In contrast, a Samarkand-based human rights activist reported that conditions were improving at Jaslyk, noting in particular that prisoners convicted of religious extremism had been reintegrated with the general prison population. Without direct access to Uzbekistan's prisons, it is difficult for us to verify whether prison conditions are worsening or improving, but we believe that the continuation of International Committee of the Red Cross prison visits offers the best hope for improved treatment of inmates. End summary.

REUTERS REPORTS DEATH OF JASLYK INMATE; CAUSE UNCLEAR

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**¶12. (U)** On May 8, Reuters reported that Odil Azizov, an Uzbek prisoner who died while serving a 15-year sentence on charges of religious extremism, had violent marks on his body indicating injuries from torture. The article noted that Azizov died on May 4 in a prison hospital in Tashkent where he had been moved from the Jaslyk prison in Karakalpakstan. Azizov's father informed Reuters that his son's body was covered with signs of torture when it was handed over to him for burial on May 5, including "a large stain and bruises on the left side of his chest" and swollen feet. The father reportedly appealed in vain to government bodies to provide emergency medical treatment to his son. The article further quoted human rights activist Surat Ikramov as stating that another prisoner, Abdurakhim Tashpulatov, died in late April after he was allegedly threatened by prison wardens, and that "at least 20 inmates" die at Uzbek prisons each month from various causes.

**¶13. (SBU)** In a May 7 article on his website, Ikramov alleged that Azizov died from lung failure after being beaten by prison guards at Jaslyk on multiple occasions. He reported

being told by Azizov's father that his son was singled out for mistreatment because he refused to abandon his religious beliefs and plead forgiveness after an intervention by Tashkent Imam Rakhmatullo Obidov and an imam from Nukus. Family members also reported to Ikramov seeing physical evidence of torture on Odil's body when visiting him at prison. They also alleged that two men visited their home in Kokand in 2006 and offered to help release Odil in exchange for two thousand dollars, a sum the family could not afford (Comment: We are certain that Ikramov brought the Azizov case to the attention of Reuters. End comment.)

¶4. (C) However, on May 8, Ikramov told poloff that Odil Azizov did not die from torture, but rather from acute bronchitis as a result of being held in a cell without heating with other prisoners during Karakalpakstan's fierce winter (Note: Karakalpakstan is the coldest region in Uzbekistan, and this past winter was reportedly one of the coldest on record. End note.)

#### FAMILY MEMBERS ALSO IMPRISONED; ALLEGEDLY TORTURED

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¶5. (SBU) According to Ikramov's article on his website, Odil Azimov's brother Mamur Azimov and his cousin Mamur Sodikov were also previously sentenced on religious extremism charges and tortured in prison. Mamur Azimov remains at prison colony 64/49 in Qarshi, while Sodikov was allegedly beaten to death by a prison guard and another inmate in December 2005.

#### INMATE IN CRITICAL CONDITION AFTER ACCIDENT

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¶6. (SBU) On his website, Ikramov also reported that Farkhod Akhmedov, who was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on religious extremism charges in 2004, is in critical condition after being involved in a construction accident at a prison for inmates with tuberculosis in Navoi province. Family members told Ikramov that Akhmedov and other prisoners with tuberculosis were forced to work on construction projects, even though prison regulations reportedly prohibited their participation in physically strenuous activities. It is unclear whether Akhmedov contracted tuberculosis while in pre-trial detention or before his arrest in 2003.

#### COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT REPORTED AT QARSHI PRISON

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¶7. (C) Human Rights Watch Director Igor Vorontsov reported on May 6 being informed by relatives of inmates at the Kasan prison (number 64/51) in Qarshi that over one hundred and fifty inmates convicted on religious extremism charges were beaten on their heels over a series of days as part of a collective punishment in February. Twenty-seven of the individuals who refused to sign documents renouncing their religious beliefs were then reportedly transferred to another prison in Bukhara. Seven of the individuals were eventually brought back to Qarshi after signing the confessions. It is unknown what occurred to the other 20 individuals, and the seven returnees were reportedly reluctant to speak to the other inmates about their treatment in Bukhara. Vorontsov told poloff that he was still trying to collect more information about the alleged incident.

¶8. (C) Comment: Collective punishments of religious and other prisoners have been reported in the past. These usually have followed disturbances such as prison riots or hunger strikes. After the punishments, the inmates are often divided up and dispersed to other prisons. Relatives are frequently not informed about the inmates' new locations for several months. Although Vorontsov has not yet been accredited as HRW's Uzbekistan representative, he continues to cautiously engage in human rights monitoring and reporting activities. End comment.

OTHER ACTIVISTS REPORT IMPROVED CONDITIONS AT JASLYK

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¶19. (SBU) In contrast to the above reports, Samarkand activist and Rapid Reaction human rights group member Kamil Ashurov released a report in April describing improving conditions at the Jaslyk prison. Ashurov told poloff on April 23 that he collected information for the report by talking to relatives of inmates who visited the prison. In particular, Ashurov reported that prison officials reintegrated inmates convicted of religious extremism with the general prison population in late 2007 (Note: Previously, human rights contacts reported that at prisons across the country, inmates convicted of religious extremism were held separately and treated much more harshly than other prisoners. End note.) He also expressed his belief that officials sought to improve prison conditions, especially those convicted of religious extremism, in late 2007 in anticipation of the restart of International Committee of the Red Cross prison monitoring in 2008.

COMMENT

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¶110. (C) Ashurov and his colleagues at the Rapid Reaction Group stand out as among the more professional in their approach to human rights reporting. His report on Jaslyk, in contrast to an earlier Rapid Reaction Report on conditions at a prison in Bukhara from February, appeared to us to be well-researched and balanced. By the same token, Ikramov's reporting is among the most professional in Uzbekistan, but his inconsistency on the Azizov case - the stark contrast between what he told Reuters and what he told us - is worth noting. We do not believe any of these activists are

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necessarily fabricating information, but all are keenly aware of EU and U.S. attention on human rights and the possibility of sanctions. The combination of emotion and politics, coupled with limited access to first-hand information, is the stuff from which rumors flow.

¶111. (C) Vorontsov's information regarding the collective punishment of inmates in Qarshi is impossible for us to confirm at this point. Similar collective punishments have occurred in the past, and as in those previous incidents, we believe that the whereabouts of the 20 missing prisoners will eventually come to light over the next few months.

¶112. (C) Without direct access to Uzbekistan's prisons, it is difficult for us to verify whether prison conditions are worsening or improving. It is particularly difficult to square away Ikramov's report of poor conditions at Jaslyk prison with Ashurov's report that conditions there were improving. Most likely, the picture is probably mixed across Uzbekistan, with some prison officials seeking to improve conditions in the light of the restart of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visits, but with the abuse of some prisoners, particularly those convicted of religious extremism, still occurring. We believe that the continuation of ICRC prison visits will encourage prison officials to improve conditions for inmates.

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